

BRUCE GOODALL | FRÉDÉRIC ZIMER

# HEADRESTS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

The Architecture of Sleep





*Project Coordinator*  
Bruce Goodall

*Graphic Design and Layout*  
Jeanne Goodall

*Content and Language Editor*  
Elizabeth Burroughs  
*in collaboration with*  
Nessa Leibhammer and Bruce Goodall

*Studio Photography of Headrests  
from the Goodall Collection*  
Justin Patrick, Cape Town

*Studio Photography of Headrests  
from the Zimer Collection*  
Gérard Etienne, Paris

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*Art Direction*  
Annarita De Sanctis

*Layout*  
Camelia Bezzola

*Editorial Coordination*  
Elena Carotti  
*in collaboration with*  
Lucia Moretti

*Editing*  
Emily Ligniti

*Colour Separation*  
Pixel Studio, Bresso, Italy

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**Cover**  
Headrest [A1021 | p. 186], carved by Makhebe  
Khanyile from Esinyameni, and owned  
by MaDlaDla Mchunu, also from Esinyameni  
in southern Msinga, KwaZulu-Natal

**Back cover**  
Khabonina Fakudze from the Nkambeni area  
of Eswatini, demonstrating how she slept  
on her headrest [A241202 | p. 336]

**Front flypaper**  
Headrests from the Zimer Collection

**Back flypaper**  
Headrests from the Goodall Collection

**Page 2**  
Headrest [FZZ45-152.2 | p. 301]

References to both collections  
are abbreviated as follows:  
BG Collection (Bruce Goodall)  
FZ Collection (Frédéric Zimer)

**Authors' note**  
Some areas in KwaZulu-Natal with a  
'Kwa' prefix have a capital beginning the second  
part of the word. This is the case when the suffix  
refers to a certain clan or group. KwaMajozi,  
for instance, means the place of the Majozi clan.  
Other names with this prefix, such as Kwashusi,  
are simply geographical place names, and  
are written without the second capital letter.

This publication has followed the convention  
of italicizing all non-English words throughout  
the text in alignment with established  
international editing guidelines.

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# FOREWORD

BRUCE GOODALL

The journey to the realisation of this book began eighteen years ago for me. My wife Jeanne and I were doing a month-long road trip in our VW campervan. Driving up the west coast northwards from Cape Town, the plan was to see as much as we could of Namibia, and a little of Angola. Angola had just come out of twenty-five years of civil war. I had managed to get us some of the first tourist visas issued to South Africans, so we were going to check it out. Not for too long though as it sounded rather daunting. We had been warned about the terrible roads and the corrupt officials and were worried as we did not speak a word of Portuguese.

I have been a collector of various things all my life. At that stage, my African art 'collection' was limited to a few wooden-sheathed Owambo knives. Since Owamboland straddles the Kunene River, which makes up part of the Namibian and Angolan border, we would be passing right through it. As a side event, I thought I would see if I could find a few more Owambo knives. Talk about opening the floodgates!

As a field collector, you collect what comes out of the field. The Owambo do not have headrests, not that I even knew what a headrest was at that stage. They do, however, have *omukonda* (those knives), *omakipa* (ivory buttons) and *eembe* (the spiral tops of the conus shell), as well as *othenya* (the most beautiful little wooden snuffboxes). I managed to buy a few old items from homesteads near the road and was smitten.

It was not only about finding the pieces. They were great of course, with their wonderful worn feel, their patina (a word I only learned when I got back) and their smoky smell. There was something else that has kept me going back for more. The people. Traditional and real. Living from the land and with the seasons; celebrating it! It is an essence, a feeling of Africa, and to interact and be with such people was the reason I had studied Social Anthropology at University of Cape Town years before. The academic side had put me off, but this I could do.

Then we went into Angola and entered the land of the wonderful Mwila, with their elaborate hairstyles and traditional culture. It was like Owamboland on steroids for me. I returned home full of excitement and with five beautiful old Mwila headrests. I had become a collector of headrests, and within a month I was back in Angola with a friend looking for more.

Items from northern Namibia and southwestern Angola, and especially headrests, of course, form the basis of my collection. It was from there that I branched out into other areas within the sub-continent. Some of the items I field collected on my numerous trips to that area were swapped with other collectors and this is how I acquired my first Zulu and Swazi headrests.

Notable was an early interaction with Paul Mikula of the Phansi Museum in Durban. We did a sizable swap, him getting a range of Owambo, Himba and Mwila pieces that were lacking from his museum's otherwise comprehensive southern African arts collection, and I some *amagugu* (Zulu treasures). Not only was this the first time Paul had let items go from the Phansi collection (his assistant







# INTRODUCTION

## HEADRESTS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

SANDRA DODSON

Near the Lusushwana or Little Usutu River, on Bomvu Ridge northwest of Mbabane in Eswatini, is Ngwenya Mine, an iron ore mine considered to be the oldest in the world. Dated by archaeologists to some 43,000 years ago, the mine was a source of haematite, an iron oxide compound with a brilliant reddish-orange lustre. In the Middle Stone Age, this highly valued raw material was ground to make red ochre powder. Here, and in many other parts of Africa where ochre could be found or traded, the rich red pigment had deep symbolic and spiritual significance. This is attested to by its widespread use as a body paint for ceremonial occasions.

In the Iron Age, around 1,800 years ago, haematite became valuable, not only for the making of ochre pigment, but for iron extraction and the production of iron implements such as hoes by skilled blacksmiths. This development would have coincided with a gradual shift to a more settled existence, as early farmers were able to till the soil for planting crops such as sorghum and millet.

The invention of sharp-bladed tools had another advantage: using adzes, professional carvers were able to create three-dimensional forms from wood, such as milk pails, bowls, hair combs and other practical domestic items. Wooden headrests, used to raise the head off the ground when sleeping, are among the most beautiful of these small, often decorative, objects with practical and symbolic value. Headrests are modest in scale, their height being the average distance from the resting head to the ground. They can be found across wide parts of the world – as far afield as the Middle East, Asia, China, Taiwan, Japan and the Pacific Islands.

Karel Nel points to a close association between the use of headrests and traditions of elaborate hairstyles in these regions. It seems likely that the creation of durable, hand-carved wooden hair combs – facilitated by more precise, bladed cutting tools – enabled the creation of these intricate hair arrangements, which also carried symbolic meanings relating to clan affiliation, social standing, spirituality, age and marital status. In Africa, the trend is evident in Zulu, Swazi, Ntwane, Mwila, Chokwe and numerous other groups. In Chokwe divination, miniature headrests are called ‘pillows of dreams’, attesting to their significance not only as a support for the head and hair, but as the vehicle through which the ancestors entered the dreaming consciousness of their descendants (Massing and Ashton 2011).

Owing to its spiritual connotations, ground red ochre pigment, mixed with animal fat, was often an important part of these beautifully sculpted coiffures, which could take hours, or even days, to complete. The late collector Clive Newman, who makes a significant posthumous contribution to this book, describes the process known as *ukuthunga isicholo* (sewing on the *isicholo*), which he witnessed in the Msinga district of KwaZulu-Natal, on the northern side of the Thukela River, in 1988. This headdress was covered in red ochre mixed with animal fat, and once complete, the widely flared structure was difficult to remove and necessitated neck support, in the form of a headrest, when sleeping.

Headrests were often so closely associated with the individual who used them that, in Nel’s words, they “came to stand as place holders or ‘containers’ of their owner’s presence or identity. They were,

1. Zongile Madondo and her grandchildren, with headrest [A330 | p. 131], at their home at Keate’s Drift in Msinga, KwaZulu-Natal, 18 June 1998







# ZULU HEADRESTS OF THE MSINGA DISTRICT IN KWAZULU-NATAL

CLIVE NEWMAN

*This essay by the late Clive Newman is from a catalogue for the 1999 exhibition of some of his headrests at the King George VI Art Gallery in Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape.<sup>1</sup> It is reproduced here in full, with some light editing to distinguish what may have been current at the time of writing, which may no longer be so. The text also reflects that his entire collection was bought by Bruce Goodall after his death.*

## Introduction

In 'traditional' Zulu society, headrests or *izigqiki* were used by married men and women as neck supports when sleeping and as stools by married men. The practice has largely died out although there are a few older and even some young people who still use them. They have mostly been replaced by pillows. The Newman Collection, now part of the Goodall Collection, comes from the Msinga district of KwaZulu-Natal, and has been collected over a period of twenty years on numerous field trips to the area. The Msinga district is an area to the north of Greytown, centred on Tugela Ferry\*. The area is distinguished by the wide variety of headrest designs.

## History

It is not known for how long Zulu people have been using wooden headrests. Almost certainly the practice was spread by trade and migration of peoples over the centuries. Neighbouring Shona and Swazi groups used them until early this century.

Before the use of iron became widespread through trade with European settlers, the Zulu king and his warrior lieutenants controlled the iron trade. As a result of this control, the king was able to monopolize the skills of woodcarvers whose tools were made of iron. Headrests that required the skills of a carver would have been reserved for the Zulu king, his chiefs and *izinduna* (headmen) (Klopper 1989: 36). Ordinary people in the nineteenth century would have used a simple block of wood or a headrest of an elementary design such as the headrest [A599] on the following page. The well-carved, ornate headrests that we see in this publication were probably not available to all men and women in the nineteenth century. As people were gradually incorporated into a capitalist economy, they became able to afford the services of a carver or the tools with which to make headrests.

1. MaNgubane  
Madondo with her  
widely flared *isicholo*  
holds her headrest  
[A867 | p. 67],  
7 July 2000

## Carvers

The cost of a headrest depended on the quality of the carving and the type of wood used. Costly headrests were often status symbols for men. Owning a headrest by a carver of local repute, such as Mashayidamu Dladla of Entanyane, Muden, for example, was a matter of much pride. Headrest







# CLIMBING MOUNTAINS AND CROSSING RIVERS

MAVIS DUMA

I am Phikisile Mavis Duma. I grew up in Muden mission in Emachunwini, the area of Msinga in KwaZulu-Natal under chief Mchunu of the Mchunu clan. My father's family were Christians (*amakholwa*) and my mother's family believed in the ancestors (*amabhinca*), so their courting was not easy. However, my father was determined to marry *intombi yebhinca*, and after long negotiations they were married.

During my younger years, I lived with my grandparents because my parents were working in Durban. When I was in Standard 6, I moved there to live with them because there was no high school in our area. I met Clive Newman in 1983 when I started working for his family in Durban. Three years later he moved out of home and I started working for him as well. One day I spotted a magazine about Msinga on his bookshelf and when he came home, I told him I am from that area and those women with the *isicholo* are my people. He was surprised as he knew me as a township woman and was very happy to find someone who was familiar with Msinga.

Clive was in the process of moving to Port Elizabeth, but we agreed to squeeze in a trip to my home in Msinga on that last weekend before he left. It was a success. People were friendly and, once there, we did not even drive from my homestead. We walked from house to house and managed to buy quite a lot of traditional items, especially beadwork.

After this Clive and I started working together. We collected beadwork, earplugs, fertility figures and spoons, as well as any other old things that people offered us. After we found our first headrest that is what we focused on. I would go on a trip for three or four days at a time. Whenever Clive found time, he would join me. It was not bad, because in between I continued to work for his family. In the beginning, we collected in the neighbouring areas such as Enyonini, Emvundlweni, Emadulaneni and Emhlumba, to name a few.

It wasn't easy, but we both enjoyed those long walks, climbing mountains and crossing rivers. It brought back my early childhood memories of walking in dense forest like the one at Inkandla. So challenging, but I got that feeling that gave me energy, that life is short, and I must push on and use every moment well. Talking to people is the other main thing with collecting, and luckily, I got on very well with the *gogos*. I am a people-person and enjoyed it. It also helped me a lot when they found out I grew up at Emachunwini and that I was one of them.

Right from the beginning Clive and I wrote notes on the pieces. What they were called in isiZulu, the name and area of their owners and something of their history. This became a big part of the job and often, after buying a headrest, we would return on another trip to ask more questions. Later we also took photographs of the people with their headrests. In the photos in this book, you will see that most people are not smiling. This is not because they are unhappy. They would more often than not be smiling and laughing just before and just after the photo. It is more about pride and having dignity. To them, smiling at a cameraman would be like flirting. The photos will be seen by many people, so they want to stand for what they believe in and not expose their family.

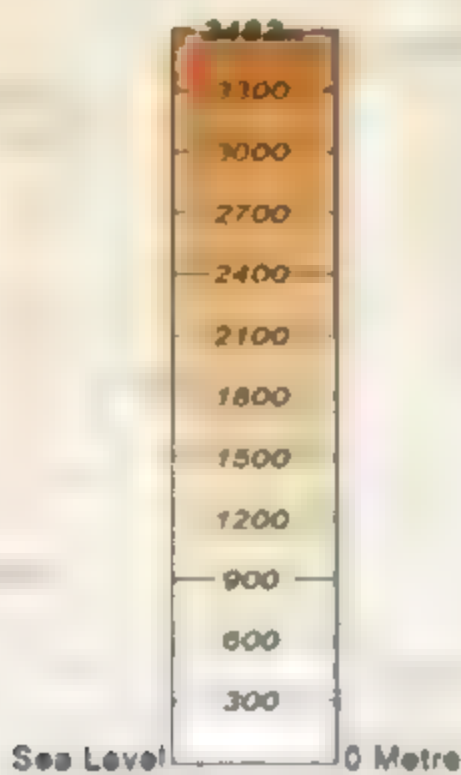


CENTRAL KALAHARI  
GAME RESERVE

BOTSWANA

# HYPSONETRIC TINTS

Highest point on map  
29°30' S 29°20' E



TROPIC OF CAPRICORN

NAMIBIA

KGALAGADI  
TRANSFRONTIER PARK

NORTHERN CAPE

KALINGVELD

BO K A R O O

G R E A T K A R O O

ROGGEYHOBBERGE

WESTERN CAPE

SHO C W A R T E R

QUITSHOORN

LETTER K A R O O

OUITSHOORN

OUITSHOORN

OUITSHOORN

OUITSHOORN

OUITSHOORN

OUITSHOORN

OUITSHOORN

OUITSHOORN

OUITSHOORN

OUITSHOORN

CAPE TOWN

KIMBERLEY

DE AAR

G R E A T K A R O O

G R E A T K A R O O

G R E A T K A R O O

G R E A T K A R O O

G R E A T K A R O O

G R E A T K A R O O





A

TROPIC OF CAPRICORN

ZIMBABWE

PLAT LIMPOPO  
TRANSFRONTIER  
PARK

TROPIC OF CAPRICORN

MOZAMBIQUE

PLAT LIMPOPO  
TRANSFRONTIER  
PARK

LIMPOPO

POLOKWANE

PRETORIA

JOHANNESBURG

ESWATINI

KWAZULU  
NATAL

LESOTHO

BLOEMFONTEIN

PIETERMARITZBURG

DURBAN

WESTERN CAPE

QUEENSTOWN

RHISHO

EAST LONDON

KING WILLIAM'S TOWN

ORIAMASTOWN

PORT ALFRED

PORT ELIZABETH

CAPE ST FRANCIS

SOUTH AFRICA

1: 2 000 000

100 80 60 40 20 0 20 40 60 80 100  
Kilometres







# Northern Msinga Owners and Their Headrests

## < KAMADLALA MTHETHWA

With Mbhekeni Mzolo headrest [A1024 | p. 90], 10 June 2001

KaMadlala Mthethwa is pictured with her Mbhekeni Mzolo headrest with its Zulu married woman (*umakoti*) motif, at her home perched high in the grassy hills of Othame, Msinga Top. KaMadlala wears an *ibhayi*, the cloth worn over her shoulders as a married woman to cover her arms, and the *gogo*'s ears are stretched, showing she would have worn sizeable *iziqhaza* (earplugs) in the past. Born in 1929 at nearby Engubevu, also part of Emabomvini under chief Ngubane, Gogo Mthethwa married in her early twenties and moved here to her husband's ancestral home. The headrest therefore dates from the early 1950s.

## > MANGUBANE MADONDO

With headrest [A867 | p. 98], 7 July 2000

Pictured against the backdrop of the hills of northern Msinga is MaNgubane Madondo from Othame. The old headrest she holds dates from the 1950s. She inherited it from her mother-in-law, who gave it to her at her marriage feast in 1977. Beautifully dressed as a married woman, MaNgubane wears *isicholo* with a beaded cotton headband and coiled *ufezela* (scorpion) front-piece. She also wears a thin beaded waistband and a few beaded neckpieces. Her purple *ibhayi* means she is *amabhinca*, someone still embracing the traditional belief in the ancestors. People who follow a Christian way of life are called *amakholwa*.









# Southern Msinga Headrests and Carvers

## MDUKWA NGUBANE

Mdukwa Ngubane was a full-time carver from Emvundlweni in Keate's Drift, an area of Msinga between Greytown and Tugela Ferry. This area along the Mooi River is also called Emachunwini, which is not a place name like Emvundlweni, but rather denotes the area under chief Mchunu, which includes most of Keate's Drift.

Ngubane's block headrests have a distinctive style, and are usually decorated with raised lines and shapes, creating earplug and domino-like patterns. He also frequently branded the letters K and T on the side of his headrests, as well as the work "SIHLE" which means "It is beautiful".

According to Clive Newman, Mdukwa Ngubane's headrests "featured a design that was extremely popular in the 1960s and 1970s. The carver lived and worked in Keate's Drift. His popularity spread north beyond Tugela Ferry although it is more usual to find his headrests in the Keate's Drift/Kopi area. Ngubane was probably one of the last carvers south of the Thukela River whose headrests were widely bought. His death in the 1980s coincided with the decline in the use of headrests.

The hole in the side of the headrest [A330] on facing page is a peculiarity that is often found in headrests made by Ngubane. The hole was often plugged very neatly by the carver according to the author's informants. The reason for the hole is unclear. Many of the holes appear to have marks which indicate they may have been used for storage purposes. Some informants or owners stated that the carver 'takes out the heart of the wood' and the hole was then plugged up, but no reason was given for doing this. Other informants stated that the hole was for inserting traditional medicine, but this was denied by others."

Detail of Mdukwa  
Ngubane headrest  
[A330 | p. 160]

Extract from *Zulu Headrests from the Msinga Area of KwaZulu-Natal*, Clive Newman, 1999.







# ESWATINI AND OUTLYING AREAS

BRUCE GOODALL

The Swazi people<sup>1</sup> live predominantly in the landlocked kingdom of Eswatini (formerly known as Swaziland), but also in the neighbouring Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal provinces of South Africa and parts of Mozambique. Their identity extends to all those with allegiance to the twin monarchs, the king, Ngwenyama, 'the Lion', and the queen, Ndlovukati, 'the She-elephant'. The royal family is from the Dlamini clan, while the country derives its name from the powerful king Mswati II.

Mswati II became monarch in 1839 at the end of a period of political disruption, warfare, and population migration termed the 'Mfecane'. The history of consolidation of the Swazi nation in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century is one of constant struggles against inside and outside forces. At the end of the nineteenth century, both the British and the Boers of South Africa tried to gain dominance in the area but, with the defeat of the Boers in the Second South African War in 1901, it became a British protectorate. Swaziland achieved independence as a sovereign country in 1968, however the influence of South Africa is conspicuous, as it remains its primary trading partner and the Swazi currency, the Lilangeni, is pegged to the South African Rand.

At independence, Sobhusa II became king and, after his death in 1986, King Mswati III ascended the throne. In 2018, Mswati changed the country's name to Eswatini, meaning 'the place of the Swazis', to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Swazi independence. He is the last monarch still wielding traditional power in Africa. While melded together from divergent linguistic and cultural groups in the past, Swazi culture today seems relatively homogeneous, with a host of shared annual ceremonies celebrating the nation. The Swazis share cultural characteristics with other people of African descent in southern Africa such as a belief in the ancestral realm and the centrality of cattle in the wellbeing and wealth of the community. Similar to the Zulu royal family in KwaZulu-Natal, they hold an annual First Fruits ceremony to strengthen the power of the king. Swazis speak siSwati, a language belonging to the Nguni linguistic group which includes isiZulu and isiXhosa.

Although there are similarities and crossovers in items from Eswatini and the KwaZulu-Natal regions such as headrests and meat platters, especially near their shared border, Swazi items of material culture are recognisably distinct. Headrests, or *sicamelo*, obtained at marriage were used by both men and women. They frequently have two sets of legs joined by a long sleeping platform with a central lug underneath. This round central lug, called the *sibhono* or navel, is found on most Swazi headrests. At times, its form is elaborated to take on the shape of the blade of a Swazi ceremonial axe. The legs on Swazi headrests, decorated with vertical flutes or grooves, are thinner at the top and taper down towards a wider base. This fluted decoration is called *sidvwaba* after the heavy, pleated leather skirts worn by married women.

With very few exceptions southern African headrests are carved from one piece of wood, a practise consistent with Swazi examples. However, here, the intersection of the legs and the sleeping platform appear constructed. The platform seems to go through the legs like a tusk mortise and tenon

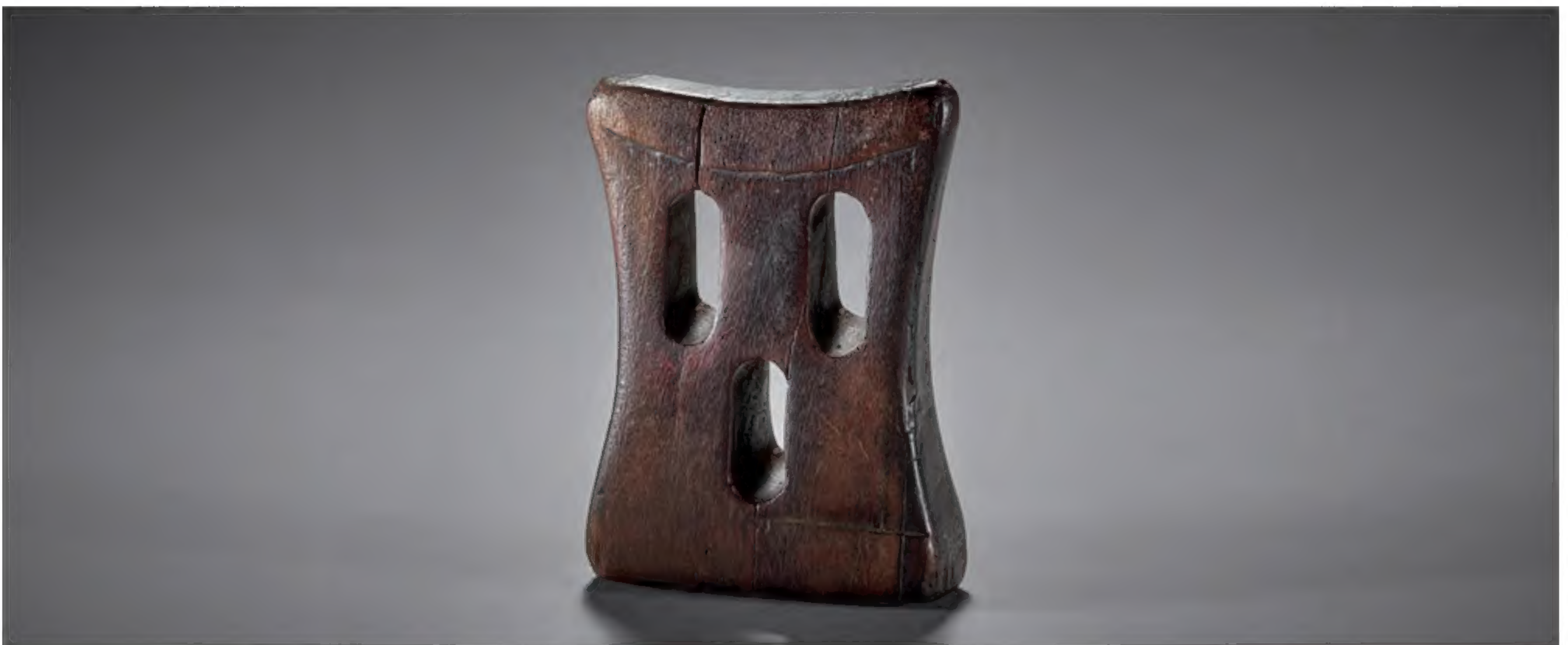






## Ntwane Carvers and Headrests

This section features studio photographs of the Ntwane headrests. It roughly follows the same sequence as the headrests in the portrait section, but some headrests have been moved or slotted into this sequence in accordance with their physical attributes.



**Sello Mathabathe**

Wood: English name unknown / *Monyile*

L: 11 | W: 4 | H: 15.5 cm

BG Collection

[NH2611]

This headrest carved by Sello Mathabathe has oval windows, and a rounded sleeping platform that curls smoothly over to the convex sides. The three windows give it an anthropomorphic quality. It has an incredible dark patina and the sides have been worn thin through extended use. Alternative view of this headrest on facing page. See Nyalewe Matiya's portrait, p. 385.



The Von Coller Family  
Michael Fitzgerald  
Bonnie Friedman  
Milkwood Framing

Gary van Wyk, Axis Gallery  
NoaLiving Gallery  
Andrea Gillarduzzi  
Kai Goodall  
Mick and Libby Goodall  
Svetlana and Alan Gous

Sam Handbury-Madin  
Owen Hargreaves  
Michael Heuermann  
Tim Houghton  
Cinda Hunter  
Tom Hurst

Rocco, Wilani, Inica and Iliro  
Bob Ince

Claire Newcombe-Jakeman  
Kapula  
Tony Kasper  
Candice Kent  
Helle and Per Knoblauch  
Adama Nostra Kone  
Erna Kruger

Ndabo Langa  
Alan Lieberman  
Stephen Long  
Jonathan Lowen

Yedwa Magagula  
Peter Magubane  
Pierre Maree  
Alan Marcuson  
James Marshall  
Majadihlongo King Mathabathe  
Haile Matuta  
George Maxwell  
Ann Meisel  
Paul Mikula  
Thea-Lize Moolman

Nicola Monro  
Neil Munro

Durban Local History Museum  
Kwazulu-Natal Museum  
McGregor Museum

Hylton Nel  
Michael Newman  
Terry Newman  
Africa Nova

Roger Orchard  
Dr. David Oyedokun

Josiane Peronnet  
AnZu and Sylvie Groschatau-Phillips

Brian Reeves  
David Roberts  
Daniel Rootenberg  
Tony le Roy

Colin Sayers  
Clive Sergay  
Shaun Sergay  
Dr Moshe Singer  
Harry Sitole  
Chris Sheffield  
Peter Stanton  
Lorin Strieman  
Jacquie Sunley  
Eva Sutton

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Anton Welz  
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